

HETEROGENEITY AND SPANISH CINEMA OF THE EIGHTIES

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I. ANOTHER KIND OF HISTORY

The decade of the 1980s was as much a period of transition for Spanish cinema as for the rest of Spanish society and culture. The increased commercial viability of Spanish films abroad is perhaps the most striking feature of that phenomenon, with works such as Saura's *Carmen*, Camus's *Los santos inocentes*, and most recently Almodóvar's *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* and *Atame*. These artistic and commercial successes are significant not only as they indicate the expansion of the audience for Spanish cinema, but also because, increasingly, Spanish cinema shows signs of having evolved in terms of the conceptual processes that both parallel and in certain ways support Spain's remarkable political transition.

One of the distinctive elements of that evolution has been the intensification of cinematic narratives of social demarginalization, a development whose roots go back to the 1970s with, among other films, Gutiérrez Aragón's *Habla, mudita*, José Luis Borau's *Furtivos* and the works of the Catalan director, Bigas Luna, in such films as *Caniche* and *Bilbao*. Whatever other differences may exist among the style and visions of these directors, their films seem to share a common political strategy: bringing to center screen precisely those figures and groups of Spaniards who, in the Franco years, had been marginalized and whose existence as sexual, social, and or political rebels had been suppressed in the aura of a constructed and false cultural homogeneity.

Thus, otherwise improbable clusters of films of this period, such as Gutiérrez Aragón's *Maravillas* (1980), Carlos Saura's *Deprisa, deprisa* (1980), Eloy de Iglesia's *El pico* (1981) and *Colegas* (1982), and Imanol Uribe's *La muerte de Mikel* (1983), may be understood as linked to the underlying project of imagining a Spain which is able to confront and even thrive on the diversity and heterogeneity of its class and gender differences. The underlying logic of such representations, however, needs to be understood not simply as an effort to recuperate some sense of social realism, but as a way of reconfiguring the spectatorial outlook toward the idea of Spain which, historically, Spanish cinema had constructed and sustained during the previous four decades. The final scene from Pedro Almodóvar's 1987 film, *La ley del deseo*, emphatically foregrounds that discursive process in a way that few other films of the period do.

In that scene, Antonio, the murderous lover of Pablo Quintero, the film director, has been cornered by the police in the apartment of Pablo's transsexual sister, Tina, played by Carmen Maura. Antonio agrees to release both Tina and a captured police officer in exchange for one hour with Pablo. Finally alone with his lover, Antonio proceeds to undress Pablo for their last sexual union. The camera discreetly cuts away to a shot of the street below as the assembled police and relatives look up to the window of Tina's apartment where the homosexual love scene is taking place. As Marsha Kinder describes the scene: «Their faces are full of awe and envy. Even the police are softened and eroticized by the passion that they imagine to be going on in the room. They become quintessential Almodóvar spectators»¹.

After the love-making scene, Antonio commits suicide, shooting himself in the head and falling dead before the altar of pop-cultural artifacts Tina had erected in her apartment. Pablo rushes to his side and, in a mock recreation of Michelangelo's *Pietà*, holds his fallen lover, thus transposing the final scene of gay love, and perhaps even the entire film, into what for some audiences must appear as a surprising religious context.

Essential to the logic of this critical sequence are three distinctive elements. The first is the diegetic centering of previously

¹ Marsha Kinder, «Pleasure and the New Spanish Cinema: A Conversation with Pedro Almodóvar», *Film Quarterly* 41:1 (Fall, 1987), 40.

marginalized behaviors, specifically, the reiteration of the film's gay/transsexual love triangle, at the point of narrative closure. Giving stage center to characters and actions which would have been unrepresentable less than a decade earlier in a Spanish film begins to suggest the shaping of this scene around an implicit historical intertext. History here, it should be noted, is not the conventional notion of a static representation of past events but rather a self-conscious awareness triggered in the audience of the ways in which their own viewing habits have undergone such a radical transformation in such a relatively brief period of time.

Related to that spectatorial self-awareness is the scene's unmistakable condition as spectacle, that is, the articulation of a *mise-en-scène* that foregrounds the process of public authentication of previously suppressed social behavior by representatives of the law. The police in nearly every one of Almodóvar's films insistently function as mediators of the audience's morally constructed sight and, tellingly, in the final sequence of *La ley del deseo* that function is reiterated as the audience's view of libidinous actions is channeled through the dramatized gaze of these on-screen characters who have already mentally demarginalized drugs, transsexualism, and gay love.

Finally, Almodóvar resemanticizes these actions, casting them as a religious tableau: Pablo embraces the fallen Antonio in a simulation of *Pietà* iconography as the crowd of police and passersby on the street look up to Tina's window. Incongruously, it may seem, the film has transformed the lovers' last embrace into a secular adoration scene which metamorphoses both the staged audience and the film's spectator into witnesses/participants of a curious quasi-religious ritual.

On one level the scene works simply as an irreverent parody of religious iconography in behalf of a cultural sensibility that rejects the norms of traditional Spanish morality. In this, it might be argued that Almodóvar has merely updated Buñuel's irreverent approach to the «Last Supper» sequence in *Viridiana*. But the dynamics of Almodóvar's scene clearly extends beyond a mere coincidence with buñuelian stylistics. Almodóvar's sense of parody is tellingly postmodern in that the scene effectively «incorporates the

past into its very structures... speaking to a discourse from *within* it, but without being totally recuperated by it» ².

That parody is worked out through the textual reinscription of two traditional ideological institutions that historically constructed and sustained the cultural discourse of *franquismo*: the Church, representing the plurality of discursive production in the service of traditional «Spanish» values; and the police, the arbiters of social law. Through the strategic reinscription of these elements into the scene, Almodóvar repositions the spectator within a semantic field from which to view and accept the transforming values of a society which, while it still remembers the patterns of its recent past, is also in the process of a radical transformation of its ethical and aesthetic sensibilities. In this manner, the scene works to reinvest the moral and social codes of *franquismo* into a newly emerging social order and, at the same time, to bring the film's audience to bear witness to that process of change.

As the narrational logic of *La ley del deseo* suggests, the most serious works of Spanish cinema of the Transition sought more than merely to revise the images of the Francoist imaginary nation. They were, at their best, efforts to evolve a new concept of historical consciousness with the Spanish audience, a consciousness related to what Michel Foucault called «effective history»: «...not [history as] a decision, a treaty, a reign or a battle, but the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it... the entry of a masked 'other'» ³.

Traversing a variety of cinematic texts, «effective history» is a pattern of resistance in both narrative and conceptual terms to the varied notions that have written the discourses of social stability that *franquismo* codified as the dominant logic of Spanish culture. Not merely reflecting social change in the eighties, these films often posed a much more ambitious spectatorial project: to engage their audience in reflection and meditation on the questions of cultural expression; in effect, to transfer to the place of

² Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), p. 35.

³ Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Edited with an Introduction by Donald F. Bouchard. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 154.

the audience the imperative of rewriting the past, of mentally «authoring» effective history as a personal project ⁴.

This tendency expresses itself in a variety of ways, not all of which are characterized with the same conceptual coherence. For that reason I want to consider the question of heterogeneity precisely with regard to its treatment of historical thematics and the foregrounding of «effective» history within the cinematic text. Three filmmakers in particular, Carlos Saura, José Luis Borau, and Pedro Almodóvar have, in a prodigious variety of ways, made the rewriting of historical discourse a basic axiom of their recent cinematic work. That rewriting has consistently been accompanied by variations of the narratives of social demarginalization we earlier noted. Underlying the cinematic production of all three filmmakers during the eighties, as we shall see, was a common effort to reinscribe as textual and conceptual foil the traces of the past in contemporary consciousness.

II. SAURA AND THE PAST

Carlos Saura is perhaps the Spanish filmmaker most closely identified with the thematics of historical inquiry. This is dramatically demonstrated in his last films of the eighties, *El Dorado* (1988) and *La noche oscura* (1989) which, rare for Saura films, are not set in the contemporary period ⁵. These are not only historical films, but very narrowly conceived *Spanish* historical films, each focusing on a political rebel of the sixteenth century. *El Dorado* details the adventures of the allegedly mad conquistador, Lope de Aguirre, whose insurrection against both the Spanish crown and the expedition in search of *El dorado* had, in fact, already been the subject of Werner Herzog's 1972 film, *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*. *La noche oscura* recounts the nine month imprisonment of the mystic poet and Church reformer, San Juan de

⁴ Such a concept of authorship as Foucault has explained, «...does not refer, purely and simply, to an actual individual insofar as it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and to a series of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy». See Foucault, 130-131.

⁵ Though *Jardín de las delicias* (1970), *La prima Angélica* (1973), and *Dulces horas* (1982) contain sequences set in the 1930s, Saura's only film until *El Dorado* set in a «historical» period is the 1963 *Llanto por un bandido*.

la Cruz, by defiant members of the Carmelite order who saw in the priest's activities the erosion of their position of authority in the imperial Spain of Felipe II.

Focusing on historical figures of rebellion —the thematic link between these two radically different characters—, Saura explores the discursive origins of the historical construction of Spanish identity using the context of Felipe's imperial notion of Spain to reveal the dissention and heterogeneity that were clearly the essence of social conflict in late sixteenth-century Spain. Through these two historical rebels of Spanish orthodoxy, Saura theorizes a moment when it might have been possible to imagine a cultural tradition for Spain quite antithetical to the repressive tradition of intolerance and religious fanaticism that in later centuries would be the dominant image of Spain seen by the outside world.

In both films, the shadow of Felipe II frames all action. In *El Dorado* it does so literally, for Antonio Moro's well-known portrait of the king serves as backdrop to the film's credits. In *La noche oscura* reference is made early in the film to the dangers of San Juan's heretical reforms to the authority of Felipe's position. The underlying tension of each film derives from placing into question the dominance of Spanish orthodoxy. This is achieved by giving narrative centrality to the two historical rebels and narrational force to the perspective of on-screen «spectators-in-the-text» who serve as surrogates for the authenticity of the contemporary audience and question the coherence and authenticity of the orthodoxy. Aguirre's daughter, Elvira, and San Juan's nameless jailor, who eventually aids him in escaping from his cell, are two marginal figures who embody the discursive resistance of a contemporary spectatorship to the clichés of an ideological construction of Spanishness that, under Francoism, became the unchallenged fabric of cultural constructions of Spain.

Clearly, Saura's strategy is to restage the struggle between oppressive religious and political fanaticism and a humanistic cultural tradition that places into question the repressive constructions of negative Spanishness. From Felipe to Franco, Saura sees an essential ideological continuity in the imaging of the individual as subservient to the inflexible cultural institutions of Church, State, and Family. His approach in both films is to problematize the very fabric of traditional historical representation and thereby

brings his audience to begin the process of questioning their own absorption of a very narrow and skewed historical tradition.

III. BORAU: RE-WRITING CINEMATIC HISTORY

Some of the same self-referential interrogation of the historical constructions of Spanishness occurs in *Tata mía* (1987), José Luis Borau's comic allegory of contemporary Spain's struggle to liberate itself from the legacy of historical repressions. The film tells the story of Elvira (Carmen Maura), the daughter of a now-deceased Loyalist general in the Civil War. After seventeen years in a convent, she renounces her religious vocation and attempts to integrate herself into the new Spain. Though facing the future, she needs some support from the past, and so she brings back to Madrid her childhood nanny, played by the legendary actress of the 1930s, Imperio Argentina.

Elvira's plight in adjusting to the new Spain of the eighties in a sense crystallizes the cultural problematic of heterogeneity. She needs not only to liberate herself from sexual repression as embodied in the Church, but also to assert an emancipated identity as a woman in a world still apparently ordered by the old patriarchy represented by her domineering brother. In the larger cultural/social context of post-Franco Spain, Elvira also feels compelled to support the historical revision of Spanish history, particularly as it relates to the recuperation of her father's rightful place in that history. It is in this context that she meets Peter (Xabier Elorriaga), a Spaniard educated at Oxford who is researching a book to show that Elvira's father really wanted a democratic regime.

In an allegorical key, Elvira's situation thus reflects the struggle of Spain in the eighties, searching through intimate backroads of memory and experience and gradually picking up the thread of a life that had been broken by the dictatorship. As represented in the film, the historical takes a multitude of forms: Elvira's own memories of her father; her efforts to support the publication of Peter's book; finally, her own sentimental and emotional ties to the past as embodied in her former childhood playmate, Teo, and her emotionally supportive nanny.

This latter triangle —played by Carmen Maura, Alfredo Landa and Imperio Argentina— is Borau's way of inserting into the narrative of *Tata mía* a cinematic self-referential history for his audience as well. As Borau has stated in numerous interviews ⁶, each of the three actors embodies the dominant style of popular comic cinema of a particular period. Thus jointly, they self-consciously reinscribe the experience of history into the cinematic text: Imperio Argentina revives the memory of the very popular style of pre-Civil War cinema that was synonymous with her name; Alfredo Landa, the *comedias españolas*, often called *Landismo* in the 1960s; finally, there is an obvious homage to Almodóvar's cinema in the presence of Carmen Maura ⁷. In bringing his audience to view Elvira's conscious activity of rediscovery, first of her nanny and then of Teo, Borau effectively creates an intricate, double-tiered textual structure in the film. Within the narrative, the characters dramatize the process of inquiry and the struggle to rewrite personal and collective past; on a metacinematic level, the three lead actors address the audience by allegorizing through their screen personas the shifting images of Spanish cultural identity over the last fifty years. Through these characters, but most centrally, Elvira, the audience is led to grasp the necessity of abandoning the protective cloister of their own narrow view of Spanish history and, like the heroine, to actively reconstruct and revise that past in accordance with the spirit of contemporary renewal ⁸.

Seeking aggressively to define herself against the constraining models of an oppressive past, Elvira, in a sense, transcends Borau's film, and becomes, almost in the Cervantine or Unamunian sense, an autonomous character. It is as if Borau had lifted the Maura character and persona out of Almodóvar's films and placed her into a similarly combative, though socially more subdued enviro-

⁶ Carlos Heredero, «*Tata mía*: un insólito ejercicio de estilo», *Dirigido por* 143 (January, 1987), 42.

⁷ Marsha Kinder, *Spanish Cinema: The Politics of Family and Gender* (Los Angeles: Spanish Ministry of Culture and the USC School of Cinema and Television, 1989), p. 48.

⁸ That theme becomes the pointed message of the film from the very start. Borau constructs a prologue in the precredits as we see a train emerging out of the darkness of a tunnel into the bright daylight. It is the train bringing Elvira to the Cantabrian village of her childhood where she will reunite with her nanny. For a fuller description of Borau's allegorical design for the film, see particularly Carlos Heredero's analysis of the film.

onment. For Borau, obviously, as for many Spaniards, Maura is the quintessential expression of the varied forms of demarginalization that characterize life and cinema in the post-Franco era.

IV. SPAIN ON THE VERGE IN ALMODÓVAR'S FILMS

Curiously, despite the extraordinary attention given to Almodóvar's cinema in recent years, very little has been said of the conceptual coherence that belies his seemingly frivolous material. Yet, within his development, a persistent set of discursive and conceptual moves suggests the serious essence of his work. The core of that conception can be readily noted in the female figures, and most conspicuously those portrayed by Carmen Maura in Almodóvar's first seven films as these relate pointedly to the concept of «effective history».

Beginning with *Entre tinieblas* (1983) there is an increasing emphasis on the status of female characters as the agents of a radical cultural change in Almodóvar's films. In the development of the "*redentoras humilladas*", the religious sect that has come from Albacete to perform charitable acts among the youthful drug culture of Madrid, Almodóvar, in effect, has constructed a new religion in which God has been replaced by the common sense of good deeds. It is a notion of religion more closely allied to the morality of Jean Genet, as Almodóvar observes, than of Jesus Christ.⁹ On one level, this new religion reorders the social priorities of Catholicism within the context of post-Franco culture. "*Dentro de poco este pabellón estará lleno de asesinas, drogadictas y prostitutas*", the mother superior proudly informs her colleagues at one point. Such a world will bring the previously marginalized Spaniards out of the shadows to which the title of the film alludes. This is a religion that does away with the oppressive institutions of family, police, and even Church.

The plot of *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* effectively rewrites social history by reconstituting the Francoist family which had abandoned the provinces for life in Madrid. Having murdered her husband, Gloria, the film's heroine, finds her actions valorized by Polo, the police officer investigating the death. Like a modern

⁹ Nuria Vidal, *El cine de Pedro Almodóvar* (Barcelona: Destino, 1989), p. 72.

update of a Calderonian honor play, the film is thus able to rewrite a happy ending to the otherwise predictable melodrama of lower-class life in the urban jungle. The happy family in post-Franco Spain is constituted by the mother now joined by her homosexual son, both able to pursue their liberation in a Madrid which is the quintessential city of desire.

A similar sense of rewriting the phallogentric and repressive scenarios of *franquismo* is repeated in both *Matador* and *La ley del deseo*. The «historical» logic of both films can be found in their use of authenticating spectacles, that is to say, a conspicuous moment which occurs at the end of each film when police detectives, supposedly the defenders of traditionalist moral and social values, are made to bear witness and thereby validate the behaviors and values of a newly emerging social order.

In positioning the representatives of the repressive institution of law enforcement to validate the behavior of characters whose desires constitute a rejection of traditional Spanish morality, Almodóvar foregrounds the circulation of once marginalized individual desire within the larger social community. Such a circulation of desire through the agency of the law signifies greater acceptance by the community of those individuals and behaviors that were previously marked as marginal and eccentric. Precisely because the scene of this validation occurs as a specular ritual, aligning the scopic activity of characters with that of the real audience, such authenticating spectacles also serve to engage their audience in a more tolerant vision of cultural order. This process, as we have already noted, is nearly identical to the final scene of *La ley del deseo*.

Tellingly, both *Matador* and *La ley del deseo* end with scenes that reconstitute the meaning of icons often associated with traditional notions of Spanishness. The matador and the religious icon function, in effect, to reinscribe a new mythology out of traditional Spanish cultural iconography. A somewhat similar act of «re-writing» of traditional cultural mythology becomes central to the development of Almodóvar's next film, *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (1988: *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*). In the first scene of that film, Pepa, again the Maura character, speaks the first voice-over of the film as the screen reveals a close-up of an improvised farmyard showing chickens in a caged area on what will be revealed as Pepa's terrace: "Hace

meses que me mudé a este ático con Iván. El mundo se hundía a mi alrededor. Yo quería salvarme y salvarlo. Me sentía como Noé".

The moment is revealing: strategically situating the scene as a prologue to the film, Almodóvar gives the voice of the creative author to Pepa, the woman. Casting her experiences as a new beginning, a rebirth, this prologue, following the pattern of the end of both *Matador* and *La ley del deseo*, effectively recasts an otherwise melodramatic comedy into the discourse of a new mythic order. In that new order, we trace the inner emancipation of the female who, having already achieved the outward marks of freedom and independence that have come with the social transformation of Spain, now struggles to achieve the inner liberation from a phallogentric past by means of her disengagement from the womanizing Iván.

In *Mujeres* Almodóvar inserts a number of conspicuous cinematic self-references through which to address his audience. Of these, perhaps the most critical is the dubbing sequence in which Pepa and Iván are engaged at various points. The scene is a clip from Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* in which Sterling Hayden delivers his famous «Tell me lies» speech to Joan Crawford. Self-consciously cueing the audience to the self-deluding male's desires for dominance and the understanding of those desires by the emotionally liberated female, this scene eventually reveals itself to be the interior duplication of Pepa's gradual liberation from Iván's phallogentrism.

It is important to note how Almodóvar has introduced the paradigm of dubbing a film for a Spanish audience as a way of breaking what theorists have called classical cinema's «homogeneity effect», that is, the construction of the illusion of naturalized viewing which involves, importantly, the synchronization of image and sound-track¹⁰. By exposing the material heterogeneity of cinematic construction in relation to this decisive cultural intertext, Almodóvar is effectively pushing his audience to recognize, as Pepa eventually will, the lure of cultural illusionism that, even in

¹⁰ In «The Concept of Cinematic Excess» Kristen Thompson, applying the approach of Russian Formalists to cinematic narrative, speaks of textual homogeneity as the unifying effect of a text, the result of a struggle of opposing forces. Some of these forces strive to unify the work, to hold it together sufficiently that we may perceive and follow its structures. Thompson notes:

the headiness of apparent cultural liberation of the eighties, still shrouds the Spaniards' self-image.

Rhyming with the biblical intertext of the film's prologue, *Mujeres* ends with Pepa's final emancipation from Iván and her announcement that she is going to have a baby. This «annunciation» of the birth of a new, presumably «liberated» generation, and Pepa's assumption of a quasi-deified stance as the mother overlooking and ordering the couples around her, suggests an implicit re-writing of the celestial history that will order the social world of this newly emerging Spain. She has become the matriarch of this new cultural and social system in which the female has finally shed the ideological chains of her imprisonment in traditional Spanish patriarchy. As in the endings of each of Almodóvar's films since *¿Qué he hecho yo?*, the audience is again positioned to witness the closure of cinematic narrative as the beginning of its own entrance into a reimagined Spanish cultural milieu. Self-consciously, the spectator's viewing of these scenes of closure states the emancipating function of the specular ritual, that is, the audience's bearing witness and tacitly legitimizing the cultural reordering that each filmic narrative chronicles.

The essence of heterogeneity in Spanish cinema of the eighties, as these observations have repeatedly emphasized, lies only partially in its reflection of change and the shedding of old and inauthentic images of Spain. Its more substantial import lies in its historical reflexivity, its re-writing of the discursive order of Francoist cultural identity. Essential to that project is each film's strategy of address to a Spanish spectatorship as it mobilizes that audience in the process of questioning, challenging, and finally re-writing as effective history the narrow discourse of Spanish cultural models and identities.

¹⁰ «...Homogeneity is haunted by the material practices it represses and the tropes of that repression, the forms of continuity, provoke within the texture of the film the figures... of the loss by which it moves; permanent battle for the resolution of that loss on which, however, it structurally depends, mediation between image and discourse, narrative can never contain the whole film which permanently exceeds its fiction» (130).

As an interesting parallel to Spanish cinema's exploration of the homogeneity effect, we note that in *Dulces horas* (1982), Carlos Saura also uses a scene of film dubbing in order to effect in his audience a similar emancipation from the homogeneity effect of cinema's ideological constructions.